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A case study of teachers' professional learning: Becoming a community of professional learning or not?

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This paper describes a school's participation in a project designed to support critical reflection of teachers' beliefs about best practice in early childhood education, and how these beliefs and practices intersected with shifting policies and trends in the broader early childhood field. The "Professional Learning" Project (PL project), was conducted in collaboration with a local university. As the project unfolded, multiple influences were found to affect its ultimate outcomes, including the tensions associated with day-to-day classroom commitments and varying levels of willingness to engage in what were at times confronting and challenging discussions. As a result, engagement, collaboration and participation ebbed and flowed.

Introduction

In this paper we examine the processes undertaken by staff at Berrivale^[1], a metropolitan primary school, to reflect on their early childhood practice, at a time when there were changing policies and practices at the national level. Berrivale Primary School conducted this process in partnership with a local university with which it had a well-established relationship. A feature of this partnership was the allocation of a university colleague to the school whose role was to build equitable, respectful relationships and collaboration for mutual benefit. It was through this relationship that the Professional Learning Project (PLP) reported in this case study was developed. The deputy school principal and two university researchers were the co-facilitators of the project that spanned one and a half years.

The aim of the PLP was to facilitate Kindergarten to Year 3 teachers' exploration of their perceptions, knowledge and understanding of early childhood pedagogy; the extent to which these matched national policies and agendas; and the development of a shared view amongst staff of effective early childhood practice. The outcome for the school was to be a process that facilitated professional development for staff, and a policy statement outlining principles of practice and guidelines for implementation at various ages and stages from Kindergarten to Year 3. The university researchers facilitated the professional learning experiences and acted as participant observers in the project. In this paper, we provide background and contextual information, a description of the methodology, and a discussion of key findings of the collaborative project.

Background and context

Research concerning teachers working together in professional learning communities has gathered momentum over the past decade. This body of literature (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Hord, 1997, 2004; Tarnoczi, 2006) espouses that collaboration and

teamwork practices within supportive learning communities have positive outcomes for teachers' professional learning. In reality, however, teachers in many schools still work in relative isolation. Even when collaboration is promoted as a significant feature in a school, it often centres on operational procedures such as examining curriculum, participating in staff meetings and contributing to decisions about areas such as student welfare, discipline, homework and supervision of children. Although these team planning activities are an important part of joint decision making, group cohesion and the smooth running of a school, they do not necessarily lead to the kind of professional reflection and debate integral to professional learning communities (Tarnoczi, 2006). In most cases this type of collaboration endorses operational decisions, rather than facilitates educational inquiry.

Collaboration is widely promoted as critical to the development of schools as professional learning communities (Leonard & Leonard, 2003). Whereas the phenomenon of professional learning communities has been endorsed extensively in the educational research literature on school improvement (Reynolds & Teddlie, 2000; Preedy, 2003) and accountability (Evers & Walberg, 2002), opportunities for teachers to interact either within or outside school have been mostly sporadic and random. Dadds (1998) suggests that the need for practitioners to work together becomes stronger when they strive to guard against conflicting government views of professional work. In planning the professional development sessions, the school executive supported the idea of like-minded colleagues joining forces. The executive saw this as a way of supporting practitioners to find the resolve to engage with and question change and to be proactive when confronting difficulties and dilemmas, both within themselves and with the system.

The development of professional learning communities relies on teachers having the desire to participate in practitioner research in order to extend their knowledge and skills, and to improve their practice. Practitioner research has gained growing support for its potential to generate teacher knowledge and to reconceptualise teachers as producers and mediators of educational knowledge (Richardson, 1994a, cited in Zeichner & Noffke, 2001). It assumes that there is significant value in establishing communities that draw on the intellectual resources of the participants in order to promote shared thinking and communication (Wood & Bennett, 2000). It requires systematic and critical inquiry in the workplace in the pursuit of professional knowledge (Macpherson, Brooker, Aspland & Cuskelly, 2004; Dadds, 1998). According to Allwright (2005), such research is undertaken within a context of participation and interaction that in turn supports collaboration and inquiry, and can be a worthy form of teacher professional development that is targeted, empowering and reflective.

Practitioner research, as mentioned above, is not as straightforward as it sounds. Zeichner and Noffke (2001) report several major criticisms of teachers involved in researching their own practice. They suggest that typically teachers are not properly trained to conduct research at an acceptable standard and that the research is therefore of questionable value; furthermore, the demands of teachers' work make it difficult for them to do research while maintaining a focus on educating students, and that teachers

tend to use their research merely to justify their current practices. These criticisms imply a lack of objectivity and critical thinking when teachers investigate their own practice.

According to Dadds (1998), practitioner research requires a level of personal investment and thoughtful intellectual consideration of the context and of colleagues' perceptions and experiences, in order to bring about positive and democratic outcomes. Moreover, what on the surface seems like collaborative inquiry may in fact be fraught with personal agendas and micro politics. Participants need to have highly developed communication and interpersonal skills in order to understand others, negotiate multiple perspectives, and maintain relationships.

Teachers have traditionally worked within the confines of their own classrooms, with little time to engage in collegial or structured conversations about practice. Kwakman (2003, p. 167), reports that the amount of teacher participation in professional learning activities is rather disappointing, considering the high value that is attached to it. Collaborative practitioner research is not very common in school organisations and teachers rarely reflect in ways that make use of explicit feedback from their colleagues.

Nevertheless, practitioner research has been carried out for various purposes. Studies by Zeichner & Noffke, (2001), McWilliam (2004), and Snow-Gerono (2005) revealed that teachers' motivation for engaging in this type of research included an interest in better understanding students, improving teaching practice, generating knowledge about teaching, and improving the contexts in which educational practice is embedded. What is also clear from the literature is the need for school leaders to support practitioners and create conditions that enable them to pursue research of this kind (Hord, 2004). Hence it is important to identify those factors that influence teachers' willingness and capacity to participate in professional learning communities.

Framework for the study

While much has been written about the characteristics of professional learning communities, there appears to be a broad consensus in the literature on how professional learning communities are defined (Avenall, 2007; Bolam, et al, 2005, Hipp & Huffman, 2003, Hord 1997). This case study therefore, draws on Hord's (1997) five dimensions of a professional learning community as these dimensions are representative of the key elements reported in the literature. Hord's framework has been used for examining the way the teaching personnel at Berrivale PS participated in and created a professional learning community.

According to Hord, successful professional learning communities exhibit the following characteristics:

1. supportive and shared leadership (Hipp & Huffman, 2003; Avenell, 2007)
2. shared values and vision (Stoll et. al., 2006)
3. collective learning and the application of that learning (DuFour, Dufour, Eakey, & Many, 2006)

4. shared practice (Mitchell, Wood & Young, 2001)
5. supportive conditions for the maintenance of the learning community (Fullan, 2006).

In this paper, the implementation and outcomes of the project are examined against these five characteristics as a way of exploring and analysing the ways in which the process was undertaken by teachers, and to identify its strengths and weaknesses.

Methodology

This study sought to explore the following questions in understanding teachers' professional learning:

1. What processes are used to develop an effective professional learning community?
2. What factors impact on the development of an effective professional learning community?

A case study approach was taken in order to develop a holistic understanding of the process undertaken by the participants during the PLP. The university researchers assumed a participant observer role and engaged in the activities by attending all meetings and discussion groups, and facilitating the workshops and professional development sessions. This method of gathering data enabled the researchers to assume the role of 'inside observer' (Creswell, 2005) and to record detailed descriptions of events to develop a deep understanding of the factors that influenced the extent to which teachers became involved in reflective practice within the context of a professional learning community.

Twelve teachers and eight educational assistants who worked across the 4-8 year age group (hitherto the PLP group) took part in the professional learning project. Data were collected through narrative recording by the participant observers, interviews of the participants, focus groups and a survey. The data were analysed using a direct interpretation method (McMillan, 2008) in order to obtain a description of the process undertaken by the participants and gain an understanding of their experiences.

The project

At the time of the partnership (2008-2009), early childhood education in Australia was undergoing extensive scrutiny as part of an 'Education Revolution' proposed by the elected Federal Government. The National Early Childhood Development (NECD) Strategy was endorsed by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) in 2009. This endorsement was intended to provide the impetus for early childhood services and personnel in each state to reassess standards of service delivery, levels of engagement and communication, and to prioritise areas for improvement and reform over the next five years.

In response to the NECD Strategy, the Berrivale school executive seized the opportunity to engage in professional discourse about their philosophical

understandings and principles of practice. Specifically, the impetus for the PLP came from the deputy principal whose major objective was to facilitate the development of a cohesive approach to early childhood education at Berrivale. Her intention was to develop a whole-school approach to early childhood education and to articulate a shared vision in response to growing system pressure that challenged existing early childhood assumptions and practices. This outcome required negotiating a shared understanding amongst early childhood staff of the professional knowledge base that underpinned effective early childhood education.

Initial investment

The PLP project began with a formal launch of the project, attended by teachers, school executive and officials from the Department of Education and the University. This event served to garner support and commitment and acknowledge the funding support from the University. It also signalled the extent to which the project was valued by the school and the university and was a reflection of the culture of learning and development that existed at the school. Resources from the collaborative research grant were allocated for the release of staff to attend out-of-school professional development sessions and for substitute teachers during school hours. Again this resource allocation was indicative of the importance the school executive placed on the notion of professional learning for school staff.

The early childhood teachers at Berrivale Primary School had traditionally displayed a culture of collaboration, shared responsibility and a team approach to their work, an ethos that had been established over a number of years. This way of working had resulted from strong administrative leadership that had set the climate and direction for the school and from a commitment by staff to promoting student learning. Through our work as university colleagues at the school we had observed regular team meetings, targeted professional development and strong leadership from the deputy principal (coordinator of the early years section of the school) in the day-to-day activities of the school. Therefore, the early childhood team was essentially already operating as a learning community. By openly valuing and supporting participation, the executive provided a positive context for the community of learners. The existing situation at the school appeared to be consistent with Hord's first two characteristics of effective professional learning communities – (1) supportive and shared leadership and (2) shared values and vision - and led to the school executive and university researchers holding a degree of optimism that opportunities to further develop shared understandings about the teachers' core business would have a positive outcome. Yet, despite these positive aspects of professionalism the process proved to be more complex than anticipated.

Starting the work

All participants attended the first professional development session, which was conducted on a Saturday. Participants were remunerated for their attendance, which was a way for the school executive to demonstrate the value placed on the enterprise itself and on the long-term professional development task, and to acknowledge and

compensate the many commitments teachers make both during and after school hours. This “collective learning” was consistent with Hord’s third characteristic of effective learning communities.

The purpose of the initial session was to ensure that all participants contributed to the project as partners in the process, that the PLP group felt ownership of the potential outcomes and that the policy would reflect a shared view of effective early childhood practice. At the first session, the participants examined their own perceptions, knowledge and pedagogy and elements of effective early childhood education. They did this by responding to the following questions generated by the co-facilitators of the project as a way of beginning the discussion:

- What do you believe are the features of effective early childhood education?
- What are the pedagogical principles that guide your practice at Berrivale PS?

Responses to these questions from group discussions and brainstorming sessions were then categorised by the participants under the following themes:

- high quality learning
- teaching to enhance learning
- curriculum development and decision making
- supportive and productive environments
- forming reciprocal relationships
- authentic assessment
- professionalism.

These themes were then further developed into statements of principles and debated in light of the strengths, challenges and opportunities they presented for the various year levels (K-Year 3) at Berrivale Primary School.

It was clear after the first session, that there was a wider divergence of beliefs about best practice in early childhood education than originally thought by the school executive. The early childhood staff held differing views on what constituted effective early childhood curriculum and pedagogy and initially, these were strenuously debated. As the project developed, this led to some continuing challenges, which are explored in a later section.

Refining and editing

A further two professional development sessions took place during the PLP group’s allocated planning time over a period of six months. These sessions were planned for participants to discuss beliefs and perspectives of early childhood education and on this basis, to refine the statements of principles developed at the whole-day session. From here, the intention was to further negotiate and articulate a shared understanding of principles and the associated practices that could form a basis for a school policy. The aim was that the process undertaken to develop the policy would give teachers a sense of ownership of the statements of principles and that the policy would guide their

future practice. In addition, the school executive was keen to publish and make the school's early childhood vision transparent for families within the school community.

Ongoing challenges

After the initial energy and optimism that permeated the discussions about the project and the official launch, the sense of cohesion and "shared vision" appeared to wane. For example, the level of willingness to attend professional development sessions, share personal opinions and debate issues ebbed and flowed throughout the editing and refining process. Of the 20 participants (teachers and teacher assistants), only five attended all professional learning sessions. Despite the organisational structures put in place by the school, such as organising common meeting times, meeting during school hours and articulating clear goals, the level of interest and enthusiasm demonstrated by several of teachers dissipated.

Some participants were reluctant to continue sharing beliefs that conflicted with those of the strongest voices in the group. A concern for some participants stemmed from differences in practice across the early childhood years from kindergarten to years 3. The deputy principal was keen for the policy to reflect pedagogical subtleties about children's level of development and stages of schooling. However, teachers at the various levels were often reluctant to advocate such views strongly. For example, the focus on play as a medium for learning was an area that warranted robust debate. For Kindergarten teachers this was a strongly held belief, but for the Year 3 teachers learning through play took a significantly minor role in their day-to-day teaching; yet the Year 3 teachers were reluctant to take a stance, put forward a view and advocate for their belief of what play in Year 3 might look like.

As a result, some teachers took an increasingly passive role or refrained from attending group meetings. For these teachers, collaborative learning may not have been a priority, or was not perceived as worthwhile. However, given that the school executive was focussed on a collegial approach, those teachers who did not attend all sessions continued to be included through distribution of materials and information for their consideration and feedback. Where collegial relationships are considered a precondition for professional learning communities (DuFour & Eaker, 1998), this kind of relationship may have been difficult for all participants.

Factors such as the time of day also impacted on teachers' willingness to attend and on their level of interaction and participation. As one teacher explained, "Sometimes it is hard to effectively articulate my thoughts due to tiredness (end of school day)". Some teachers did not see the activity as a key priority and therefore were not committed sufficiently to give up their time, while others found the small-group sessions personally rewarding. One teacher commented in the survey "Not everyone has the same interest, and negative attitudes towards the project can undermine the success".

When attendance was out of school hours and therefore optional, only small numbers of staff attended. This was helpful in that the discussion was focussed and reflective, but less helpful in that it "could limit the growth of understanding" (teacher

observation in survey). A covert level of resistance from some staff was evident, both through reluctance to attend all sessions, and tensions in explicitly expressing their early childhood thinking and approach. The broader “shared values and vision” that led to such early confidence about the potential success of the project were not as strong or as widespread as originally believed. Those who did share a vision were able to move forward and develop this in more precise ways, but they were unable to take less enthusiastic colleagues with them along the journey. This would seem to confirm Hord’s second principle of the need for “shared values and vision” for the most effective professional learning experiences. Without this shared vision, there were limits to what could be achieved.

Reaching the goal

The fourth professional learning session was a half day, set aside for a focus group of volunteer participants to critique, edit and refine the penultimate draft of the policy statement. These teachers valued the small size of the group and felt it enabled a deeper level of discussion and joint decision making to occur. They felt focused and believed they were able to reach the desired outcome: a final draft of the document to be presented to all participants for final endorsement. It was assumed that the success of the project would be judged by the degree to which participating teachers endorsed the final draft, its publication and distribution to the school community and more importantly the level to which the policy impacts teachers’ practice. The extent to which actual practice changed for the teachers involved in the project has yet to be determined. Thus, Hord’s third condition of effective professional development (shared practice) is not likely to be immediately evident as a result of this project, given that change in practice takes time to reach a level of sustainment.

Continuing the journey

At the conclusion of the PLP, all staff members involved were encouraged to consider their current practice in light of the newly developed principles and to identify areas for future development. They were also invited to submit expressions of interest to conduct individual action research projects that examined a particular aspect of their practice in relation to the principles of practice that had been developed. Three teachers took up this opportunity. These teachers are currently in the process of “the application of their learning”, the third of Hord’s conditions for effective professional development.

With respect to the individual project, the school executive offered support in the form of classroom release time to spend with the university researchers to plan the project, and financial support for the purchase of classroom resources. This development was seen by the school executive as an important part of the staff’s ongoing professional learning, and a step forward from operating as a “community of learners” to “teachers as researchers”. Arguably, it also fulfils Hord’s fifth condition – “supportive conditions for the maintenance of the learning community”.

Discussion

Hord's (1997) characteristics of an effective professional learning community - supportive and shared leadership; shared values and vision; collective learning and application of learning; shared practice; and supportive conditions - were evident to varying degrees throughout the PLP. The school executive had endeavoured to foster a culture of collaboration and collegiality amongst staff. Financial resources were allocated to the professional learning activities. Time spent on the project outside of school hours was remunerated; substitute teachers were employed to release teachers within school hours so group meetings could be held; and funds were allocated for the purchase of teaching materials. Nevertheless, including all members of a team in an experience that is equally relevant and meaningful is a multifaceted endeavour and it takes time and cultural change to move all members from initial involvement in professional learning to that of long-term commitment and sustainability (Hipp, Huffman, Pankake & Olivier, 2008).

We, the participant observers, found that a range of factors affected the PLP group's willingness and capacity to be involved in a professional learning community and their enthusiasm for self examination and reflection on their current theoretical and practical knowledge. These factors are discussed below.

Tensions and differences with philosophical perspectives

When differences in philosophical perspectives arose, some teachers did not appear to have the confidence to voice their opinions or challenge the more dominant views. Because teachers tend to operate in isolation, they are able to maintain privately held beliefs and practices. In a public forum, however, teachers need to be empowered to voice their views. Given that most teachers generally form strong social relationships within school settings, it may be that stronger professional relationships need to be established where all staff feel supported in critiquing individual practice, and that more time and energy needs to be devoted to this more challenging aspect of school life.

The discourse around professional learning communities strongly emphasises the benefits of collective inquiry and collaborative communities that have a shared common purpose for action and commitment to action (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). This was not always the case during the PL Project during which these same practices seemed to inhibit teacher's learning. At Berrivale, a collaborative community of learners was encouraged by the deputy principal and most staff chose to participate and contribute. Articulating personal views, however, takes courage and confidence in the face of potential debate and for some teachers this meant raising conflicting perceptions and practices. When consensus is perceived as a desired outcome, debating and contesting views and opinions may be regarded as a stressful activity rather than a co-construction of that knowledge. Whereas the actively participating teachers found the experience worthwhile and positive for stimulating an examination of their educational practices, others found the experience daunting and did not feel empowered to disagree with colleagues or school executive.

Perceived value of group learning

For some teachers, engaging in collaboration and communal discourse was regarded as an encroachment of their valuable time and compelled them to prioritise what they felt was important on a day to day basis. At Berrivale Primary School there was an articulated school ethos of collaboration across all school endeavours and members of staff were hired on the basis of their stated support for this ethos. However, this was clearly not enough to convince all staff of the value of the PLP. Co-constructing knowledge of learning and teaching within a professional learning community requires staff to have a high level of motivation to learn, to be confident in expressing personal views, and to be receptive to change and innovation. These qualities were not evident for all teachers in the PL project. Moreover, these conditions take time to develop and to be nurtured, especially when they are different from the way teachers have typically worked.

Time and demands of the job

Attendance at all professional learning sessions was not consistent, with some staff citing demands of the job as a time constraint and reason for not attending. Non-attendance by some staff was noted by those who did attend and this served to divide the group. While the level of professionalism displayed by all staff was commendable, a deep commitment to ongoing professional learning and openness to change requires a shift in the extent to which collaboration, teamwork and, most importantly, professionalism are valued. Some staff saw the process as an imposition, and not having immediate impact on their current teaching practices. For this reason, involvement in the project was not perceived as a priority amid the many competing demands of daily teaching and living.

School executive role

During the PLP project, members of the school executive were focused on the process of fostering professional learning communities and the impact professional learning could have on student outcomes. Although the school executive saw the benefit of shared thinking for enhancing the school's educational reputation, staff cohesion, and development of collegiality amongst staff, the ultimate success of these practices relies on a range of management and leadership skills. The school executive was keen to promote self-reflection amongst staff, especially reluctant staff, but despite the support the executive offered through time release, remuneration and offers of school resources, some staff resisted full participation. In most cases, the school executive led the agenda by designing the tasks, selecting the topics, and controlling the group participation, making the PLP essentially a top-down initiative. As indicated by Cranston (2009), school executive are generally focused on processes for building learning communities, a most admirable quality. Nevertheless, they need to investigate how supports, structures and processes can be democratic and sensitive to teachers' expectations of professional learning communities.

Influence of university researchers

Outsider influence may have created an additional pressure that could have suppressed participants' confidence to voice differing opinions and thereby affected teachers' general willingness to participate. Although the teachers seemed comfortable with the university researchers, and the professional learning occurred in the familiar school environment, the university researchers may have been a constraining influence on teachers' communication and contribution. This is clearly a matter that warrants further investigation.

Conclusion

The goal of the Professional Learning Project at Berrivale Primary School was to provide a forum for early childhood teachers to develop a shared vision of early childhood education within a culture of collaboration, and for the discussions to be a springboard for further teacher action research. The degree to which the professional learning community was nurtured and became an effective support structure for teachers' professional learning is not entirely clear. For some teachers the process facilitated the exploration of individual perspectives, and was a springboard for further self-examination and reflection in the form of action research. For others, participating in a team, collaborating and speaking out about contentious issues was problematic. Nevertheless, the ultimate goal of the project was met: an information booklet describing effective early childhood practice at Berrivale was developed and distributed to families.

In this report we have identified various factors that may have influenced the teachers' level of engagement and contribution, and impacted on their capacity for self-examination and reflection. One factor is the personal and professional investment individual teachers are willing and able to make, based on their perceptions of the relevance of the professional learning task. Another factor is the value put on professional development both individually and in terms of the shared culture of the school. Finally there is the factor of egalitarianism. We have proposed that professional learning within a professional learning community has a better chance of succeeding if teachers contribute as equals to setting the agenda, bringing about change, and ultimately improving their own practice. We have only touched lightly on this important aspect of professional learning, but intend to explore this further in future research.

Endnote

[1] Berrivale is a pseudonym.

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